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CIA

Down, profile, down

WASHINGTON, DC

"The difficulties of the past decade are behind us", said Mr William Casey, director of the Central Intelligence Agency, in a newsletter to employees last week, announcing that the agency's contacts with the press and the public would be further curtailed. "The time has come for CIA to return to its more traditional low public profile", he added, as he also cut back the staff assigned to keep congress informed of agency business.

That Mr Casey's unusual newsletter was leaked to the press is an indication that the CIA cannot yet retreat entirely behind a veil of secrecy. None the less, his message was a kind of confirmation that things have indeed changed at Langley. Through some unspoken process, the agency seems to have been given a green light to carry on its business unfettered. Indeed, the CIA's secret budget—already many billions of dollars—is being increased considerably by the Reagan administration, and there is talk that the agency is reviving and expanding its covert operations overseas (and possibly at home). Its clout at the White House could scarcely be greater, what with Mr Casey, who was Mr Reagan's campaign manager last year, in the directorship and Mr George Bush, himself a former CIA director, in the vice-presidency.

If the "difficulties of the past decade" were not behind the CIA, then it surely would have been the object of some ridicule last month, when it issued an annual report featuring statistics on international terrorism. "Statistics in this publication replace all statistics in our previous surveys", said a self-conscious footnote. That explanation was necessary because the new report claimed there had been 6,714 terrorist incidents between 1968 and 1980—more than twice as many

as last year's report had counted for the years between 1968 and 1979. Inasmuch as the agency was including only 760 incidents for 1980, the new, more fearsome figures could be produced only by a reclassification of previous data. The introduction of several new categories—including "threats", "hoaxes" and "conspiracies"—helped the agency to inflate and reinterpret the historical record.

Coming when it did, just as the secretary of state, Mr Alexander Haig, and other administration officials were pressing their view that communist-inspired terrorism is one of the major problems facing the world, the CIA report was convenient. Almost all the incidents it catalogued were blamed on communist and other left-wing groups. The explanation: "Most terrorist activity by right-wing groups will remain domestic in nature and thus will not be reflected in our statistics". To many observers, however, the new CIA numbers smacked of "policy-directed intelligence"—data intended to serve, rather than inform, the policy process.

That would be a departure for the CIA; for whatever other abuses it might have committed during the 1960s and early 1970s, the agency was always respected for its honest and forthright, if sometimes unwelcome, reporting on the military and political situation in Vietnam.

In more vulnerable times, the CIA would also have been stung by the unravelling story of Mr Frank Terpil and Mr Edwin Wilson, former agency operatives who arranged for big shipments of sophisticated arms—and training in their use—for the regimes of Colonel Muammar Qaddafi in Libya and General Idi Amin in Uganda. According to two articles in the New York Times magazine by Mr Seymour Hersh, an investigative journalist who exposed the CIA's domestic operations in 1973, Mr Terpil and Mr Wilson may have had help with their business ventures from former colleagues still well placed inside the CIA, and the agency at

first resisted co-operating with investigations of the men's activities by the justice department and by Admiral Stansfield Turner, President Carter's CIA director. Both men were indicted last year, but both are still at large.

Liberal critics of the CIA have criticised it for not pursuing and denouncing the likes of Mr Terpil and Mr Wilson as vigorously as it has Mr Philip Agee, Mr Frank Snepp, Mr John Stockwell and Mr Victor Marchetti, former CIA employees who have turned against the agency and revealed in books, articles and speeches the identity of other intelligence personnel or the nature of the agency's operations overseas. On this contrast in reaction, however, the agency has remained silent.